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Protected No More

Uyghurs in Türkiye

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A protester from the Uyghur community living in Türkiye stands with East Turkestan flags in the Beyazit mosque in Istanbul on March 25, 2021, during a protest against the visit of China's foreign minister to Türkiye. © 2021 BULENT KILIC/AFP via Getty Images

Summary

> I'm even afraid to go outside, for simple things such as groceries, because I don't want to end up in deportation center again.
>
> — A Uyghur whose residency was cancelled arbitrarily by Turkish authorities, July 2025

The Uyghurs are a group of 11.6 million Turkic people who live in northwestern China. Since 2017, the Chinese government has subjected them to severe human rights abuses which Human Rights Watch and independent legal experts have concluded amount to crimes against humanity. Hundreds of thousands of them live abroad, and an estimated 50,000 call Türkiye home. Due to their ethnic and cultural ties, Türkiye has long been a safe haven for Uyghurs, including via preferential immigration policy that allows Uyghurs to become long-term residents and citizens.

But since 2022, as Türkiye-China ties warm, and as Türkiye adopts increasingly anti-immigration policies, Türkiye has become less safe for Uyghurs without Turkish citizenship. Turkish authorities have arbitrarily assigned "restriction codes" to Uyghurs, among other migrants, denoting them as "public security threats," often without reasonable justification and without evidence they pose any threat. The assignment of such codes (typically code "G87") can lead to a cascade of negative and often devastating consequences: denial of citizenship, international protection, or other status that entitles one to residency, effectively making them "irregular migrants" and some eventually receive deportation decisions. When such individuals get picked up by or for any reason interact with police or immigration officers, they can be sent to a deportation center.

If returned to China, especially from a country such as Türkiye that the Chinese government deems "sensitive," Uyghurs may face detention, interrogation, torture, and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.

The Turkish government claims it has never directly deported Uyghurs to China. But there is at least one reported incident in May 2018, when Turkish authorities reportedly deported at least three Uyghurs directly to China. Indirect refoulement to China has also been reported: in June 2019, Turkish authorities deported a Uyghur women and her two

Additionally, Human Rights Watch has found press reports of 33 Uyghurs who were detained at deportation centers in Türkiye between December 2018 and October 2025. The actual number is likely higher: A Türkiye-based non-governmental organization, which wishes to remain anonymous, says it documented over 100 Uyghurs held by Turkish authorities in deportation centers in 2024 alone.

In the deportation centers, Turkish immigration authorities have pressured, sometimes forced, Uyghur detainees to sign "voluntary return" forms. This has become a general practice in Türkiye affecting other migrant communities as well, including Syrians and Afghans. At least three of the Uyghurs interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they had signed such a form. One of them was deported in 2019 to the United Arab Emirates which has had an extradition treaty with China since 2008. This person later traveled to several other countries before making his way to safety. During this period, he was harassed by Chinese government agents and detained twice by local immigration authorities, and host governments were pressured by the Chinese government to repatriate him. Another Uyghur told Human Rights Watch that Turkish police brought him to Istanbul Atatürk Airport in 2019 to be deported, but he was able to thwart the attempt by making a scene at the airport.

The crackdown on immigration in Türkiye in recent years has been accompanied by significant erosion of the *de jure* and *de facto* preferential treatment of Uyghurs there. Those preferential treatments include eligibility of Uyghurs to apply for long term residence permits without fulfilling all requirements and subsequently for Turkish citizenship with a route designated for communities from Turkic origin.

As noted, Uyghurs increasingly are being subjected to "restriction codes," an assignation attached to someone's residency or passport in policing and immigration databases that effectively nullifies the previously granted privileges. The assignment of restriction codes is linked to the implementation of Türkiye's Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection, but how and why codes are currently assigned is unclear and in practice their use seems to reach far beyond what was intended by the law. In specific cases, it is often done without reasonable justification, concrete evidence, or a clear causal link to wrongdoing, according to Uyghurs and lawyers interviewed and court documents reviewed by Human Rights Watch. Similarly, authorities have summarily cancelled the residency permits or rejected Uyghurs' residency or citizenship applications on the basis that they pose a "public security threat" without providing supporting evidence.

also base these codes on intelligence provided by other governments. In some cases, the Chinese government submitted lists of individuals to the Turkish authorities whom Beijing brands as "terrorists," a term it conflates with peaceful activism or expression of Uyghur identity in Xinjiang. People on these lists have ended up being tagged with restriction codes.

According to one Turkish official knowledgeable about the situation, the immigration system's use of restriction codes creates debilitating uncertainty for Uyghurs and "pushes people's lives toward a complete unknown."

For this report, Human Rights Watch conducted a total of 20 interviews, 13 with Uyghurs, two of whom are representatives of Uyghur civil society groups in Türkiye, six with immigration lawyers in Türkiye who work on cases related to Uyghurs, and one Turkish government official knowledgeable about the situation.

Of the 13 Uyghurs interviewed by Human Rights Watch, nine have been in a deportation center at least once because of a restriction code. Five currently live in Türkiye without legal status and express fear of leaving their residences to go outside, as Turkish police or immigration officers are cracking down on irregular migrants. Two of the interviewees were recognized as "conditional refugees," a quasi-refugee status in Türkiye which offers them international protection, yet authorities cancelled their status anyway without giving any explanation. Authorities have ruled that both are now subject to deportation.

Human Rights Watch reviewed 12 deportation decisions and four decisions to reject Uyghurs' residence permit issued by the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM), the agency in Türkiye's Ministry of Interior responsible for migration and international protection matters in the country, and three decisions to reject citizenship applications by the General Directorate of Population and Citizenship Affairs. All those documents, dated between 2018-2025, used broad language and did not provide any specific explanation, references, or assessment that would enable one to evaluate the merits of the decision.

Under Turkish law, individuals can appeal these deportation decisions, but according to a lawyer who has made such appeals many times, "judges can often make a negative decision when they see restriction codes, just to be safe."

Human Rights Watch reviewed five court decisions issued in 2024 and 2025 concerning deportation orders against Uyghurs deemed a threat to public order and security. In each case, the court decisions upheld the deportation order without saying what the individuals

they had not established that Uyghurs would be at risk of ill-treatment and torture if sent to China.

Interviewees also reported ill-treatment and poor conditions at the deportation centers. Four of them were strip-searched.

In 2017, the Turkish government signed an extradition agreement with China, but the Turkish Parliament has yet to ratify it. The extradition agreement, if enacted, will pose a significant and additional threat to Uyghurs in Türkiye.

The Turkish government is obligated to respect the international law principle of nonrefoulement, which prohibits countries from returning anyone to a place where they would face a real risk of persecution, torture or other serious ill-treatment, a threat to life, or other comparable serious human rights violations. Refoulement is prohibited by three human rights treaties to which Türkiye is a party—the European Convention on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and by the 1951 Refugee Convention as well as by customary international law. The prohibition is incorporated into Türkiye's Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection.

Because of the widespread and systematic persecution of the Uyghur people, Human Rights Watch regards Uyghurs from Xinjiang outside China as having a well-founded fear of being persecuted should they be forcibly returned.

Human Rights Watch urges Türkiye and all other governments to recognize them as refugees on a prima facie basis. The Turkish government, therefore, should immediately halt all deportations and suspend deportation determinations affecting Uyghurs, including deportations to third countries, where the risk of chain deportations resulting in refoulement is heightened.

The Chinese government should end its crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and halt all forms of transnational repression against Uyghurs abroad.

Other governments, when assessing cases of Uyghurs applying for resettlement from Türkiye or for asylum after having passed through Türkiye, should not consider Türkiye as a safe country. This is the case even if they may hold residence permits or international protection status in Türkiye, as those statuses are no longer secure.

Methodology

For this report, Human Rights Watch conducted a total of 20 interviews, 13 with Uyghurs. All the 13 Uyghurs interviewed left China after 2014 and lived or are currently living in Türkiye with various forms of residency status. Nine of the 13 are still in Türkiye while four left the country between 2019 and 2025.

It is challenging to conduct interviews with Uyghurs because of the high level of surveillance of the community by the Chinese government. Five other Uyghurs initially agreed to share their experiences with Human Rights Watch but withdrew their consent or stopped responding out of their expressed fear of retaliation from the Chinese government. Their cases are not included in any parts of the report.

Human Rights Watch conducted the interviews in Uyghur and Turkish, both online and in-person, between March and July 2025. All interviewees were informed of the purpose and voluntary nature of the interviews. They were told they could decline to answer any of the questions, provide off-the-record answers, and could end the interview at any time. The quotes included in this report are based on the written notes taken during the interviews. Human Rights Watch provided no payment, service, or other personal benefit to the interviewees.

Human Rights Watch reviewed relevant Turkish government policies and documents, such as deportation decisions, case records, circular orders, official documents, and five court decisions related to Uyghurs in researching this report. Human Rights Watch also reviewed publicly available cases of 33 Uyghurs who were held in deportation centers between December 2018 and October 2025.

Human Rights Watch wrote to the Turkish authorities on September 23, 2025, and again on October 27, 2025, requesting information on the situation of Uyghurs in Türkiye but had not received a reply at time of writing. A copy of the letter is included in the Appendix of this report.

Essential Context

Chinese Government Crimes against Humanity in Xinjiang

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang or XUAR), located in the northwest of China, is home to Uyghur, Kazakh, and other predominantly Muslim populations. These Turkic peoples have languages and cultures that are different from those of the Han Chinese majority in China. Some Uyghurs refer to the territory as "East Turkestan."

Since President Xi Jinping came to power in late 2012, the Chinese government has accelerated repression throughout China and aggressively pursued assimilationist policies towards ethnic minorities.[1]

The Chinese government has long carried out repressive policies against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.[2] But since late 2016, the Chinese government has dramatically escalated these human rights abuses as part of its "Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism" (严厉打击暴力恐怖活动专项行动).[3] These abuses include arbitrary detention and imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearances, mass surveillance, cultural and religious persecution, separation of families, and forced labor.[4] Researchers have also documented the use of sexual violence and violation of reproductive rights.[5]

The Chinese government has forced nearly all Uyghurs to hand in their passports and otherwise controls their movements, making it very difficult for them to escape the abuses.[6] It has justified such policies and its broader crackdown as necessary to counter terrorism, instrumentalizing past violent incidents it attributed to Uyghur perpetrators to install a regime of control and repression that affects millions, and conflating Uyghurs' peaceful activities, such as having Quran readings stored on a phone, with extremism and terrorism.[7]

Human Rights Watch concluded in a 2021 report that such abuses constitute crimes against humanity, that is serious specified offenses—such as murder, torture, and rape—

Nearly a decade after the start of this crackdown, an estimated half-million people, including many prominent Uyghur intellectuals and cultural figures, remain in Xinjiang's prisons serving long and arbitrary prison sentences.[9] The Chinese government continues to maintain a high level of repression and surveillance in Xinjiang and tightly control Uyghurs' expression and behavior.[10]

International reporting on the Chinese government's abuses against Uyghurs has encouraged widespread global condemnation of such treatment. In 2021, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the European Union imposed targeted sanctions on Chinese and Xinjiang government officials responsible for these abuses, while the United States also enacted the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) to stem the flow of forced labor tainted goods from entering the US.[11] But Muslim majority countries and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation have largely remained silent.[12]

In August 2022, the United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a major report concluding that the Chinese government's atrocities in Xinjiang "may amount to … crimes against humanity," which prompted a landmark vote to discuss the report at the UN Human Rights Council. [13] The Chinese government narrowly escaped such scrutiny, however, due to its international clout.[14] On the second anniversary of this report, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk stated that in Xinjiang "many problematic laws and policies remain in place."[15]

The Chinese authorities have denied these abuses. They have sought to manipulate the discourse about these abuses globally through propaganda and disinformation, and to neutralize international pressure to hold them accountable.[16] They have also dismissed the OHCHR report as "illegal and void" and continue to reject all its recommendations.[17]

Chinese Government Transnational Repression of Uyghurs

Uyghurs abroad are not safe from the Chinese government's repression. The Chinese government closely surveils and intimidates the diaspora, detains and imprisons family members of exiled dissents, and forces some Uyghurs to return.

Hard Campaign, the Xinjiang authorities heightened scrutiny over those with foreign ties.[18] Uyghurs who have been to one of a list of "26 sensitive countries," which include mainly Muslim-majority countries such as Türkiye, Malaysia, and Indonesia, have family there, or otherwise communicate with people there, have been interrogated, detained, and in many cases arbitrarily imprisoned.[19]

The Chinese government has tried to force Uyghurs who have fled China or those who live abroad to return, where they are likely to face serious harm. It has regularly accused Uyghurs, especially those who are politically active, such as former World Uyghur Congress President Dolkun Isa, of being "terrorists" and has sought other governments' cooperation in arresting them, including via the Interpol Red Notice system.[20]

The Chinese government has also successfully secured the forced return of Uyghurs without issuing extradition orders or going through formal bilateral legal channels, instead leveraging its political or financial influence over host governments. The physical acts of transnational repression, including detention, arrests, or extradition, are often done through China's collaboration with the security services of the host states. Governments that have permitted these extraditions have violated international legal protections against nonrefoulement.[21]

Particularly notorious incidents of mass refoulement have happened in Thailand. In 2014, Thai authorities charged hundreds of Uyghurs—many of whom had fled from escalating repression—with immigration violations and held them in detention centers. In 2015, while Thai authorities released about 170 of the detained Uyghur women and children to Türkiye, they also forcibly returned over 100 Uyghur men to China.[22] The remaining dozens of Uyghurs were held in indefinite detention until February 2025, when Thailand forced another 40 Uyghur men to China.[23]

However, similar incidents have also happened in other countries. Notably, Egyptian authorities have arbitrarily arrested dozens of Uyghurs since at least 2017, allowed Chinese officials to interrogate them in Cairo, and deported many of them to China.[24] There have also been documented cases of arbitrary arrests, detentions, and deportations, often at the request of the Chinese government, in Malaysia, Cambodia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Tajikistan.[25]

The Place of Uyghurs in Türkiye-China Relations

international levels, Türkiye has historically raised concerns about human rights violations in the Uyghur region.

Over a decade ago, in 2009, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was one of the few leaders in the world who challenged the Chinese government in the aftermath of the July 5 Urumqi protests, which turned into ethnic violence, when the government mounted a repressive crackdown on the Uyghurs. Erdoğan called the July 5th violence in Urumqi a "genocide."[27]

Likewise, in 2019, Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement raising concerns over detention camps in the Uyghur region.[28] In 2020, Türkiye urged China to respect and guarantee the cultural and religious identity of Uyghurs at the UN General Assembly's Third Committee.[29] In 2021, Türkiye signed a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council, along with 42 other countries, expressing concerns and calling for China to end its repression in the Uyghur region.[30] In September 2022, Türkiye also released a statement following the UN OHCHR's report on the Uyghur region, stating:

> Our expectations and sensitivities for the Uyghur Turks to live in welfare and peace and the protection of their fundamental rights and freedoms are emphasized both in our bilateral contacts with the PRC authorities and at the international platforms, especially the United Nations.[31]

Following the Chinese government's Strike Hard Campaign, in December 2022, former Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu publicly criticized the Chinese government for blocking Türkiye's visit to the Uyghur region for five years.[32]

Türkiye has also accepted asylum seekers and refugees who fled China but were unable to leave Southeast Asia, including more than 170 women and children released from Thailand in July 2015.

Indeed, Türkiye has long maintained a preferential immigration policy toward Uyghurs, who are often labeled "Uyghur Turks" in Türkiye, and aspects of that policy remain in place.[33] For example since 2017, Uyghurs have been able to apply for long-term residence permits through the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) in a way that other immigrants have not.[34] Because of the preferential policy towards Uyghurs, they don't have to fulfill some requirements other groups face to be eligible for the long-term

Long-term residence permits offer the most secure immigration status for Uyghurs until they can become citizens, while humanitarian residence permits and conditional refugee status are the least secure. Uyghurs who arrive without a valid passport or visa are generally given a humanitarian residence permit.

According to Turkish government statistics as of December 2021, 17,997 Uyghurs had long-term residence permits, 6,787 had been naturalized as Turkish citizens, and 2,000 had citizenship applications pending.[35] No other statistics on Uyghur immigration status have been published since. There is no available data about Uyghurs with other permits or with conditional refugee status.[36]

However, since 2022, the Turkish government appears to have dramatically toned down its expressions of concern about the plight of the Uyghurs. This is likely due to various factors, including the Chinese government's growing trade and investments with Türkiye as part of its Belt and Road Initiative and the Chinese government's propaganda and influence operations through its United Front Working Department.[37]

After the Chinese government allowed the Turkish Ambassador to Beijing to visit Xinjiang twice in less than a year, in July 2023 and April 2024, the Chinese state media quoted the Turkish ambassador praising Xinjiang's "rapid economic development" and the enjoyment of "economic and social rights as stipulated by the right to development" without mentioning any rights violations.[38] In June 2024, during Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's visit to China and Xinjiang, Chinese state-owned CCTV reported that the foreign minister had commented on Ankara's robust commitment to China's territorial integrity and its "One China" policy.[39]

Turkish pro-government newspapers have started to publish stories celebrating the achievements of the Chinese Communist Party that read more as advertorials than objective reporting. Meanwhile, journalists from Turkish state-owned media have participated in Chinese government-sponsored press tours to Xinjiang, contributing to the Chinese government's whitewashing of its atrocities in the region, while both pro- and anti-government media self-censor reporting about Chinese government's abuses in Xinjiang.[40]

Meanwhile, the Chinese government reportedly has continued to carry out espionage activities in Türkiye targeting Uyghur groups and Turkish officials.[41]

back home to ask them to provide information about fellow Uyghurs.[42]

Turkish authorities have also repeatedly blocked Uyghurs from organizing protests against the Chinese government and rejected citizenship applications of some of the organizers because they had posed "national security risks."[43]

Anti-Immigration Policies in Türkiye

Türkiye is one of the world's largest refugee-hosting countries. By August 2025, more than 2.5 million Syrians had temporary protection status, a special status provided for Syrian nationals, refugees, and stateless persons who arrived Türkiye after 2011. In addition, as of August 2023, more than 290,000 people from other non-European countries had a form of conditional refugee status.[44] Apart from the large Syrian population, the Turkish government deems most people from non-European countries irregular migrants and strictly limits avenues for them to apply for international protection, routinely deporting large groups and conducting mass summary pushbacks at the borders.[45]

During the May 2023 election campaign, opposition politicians increasingly weaponized xenophobic sentiments. The government authorities unlawfully deported Syrian men and some boys to Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria. They did so through the often-used practice of coercing them into signing voluntary return forms. A May 2023 Constitutional Court judgment found forced return under the guise of voluntary repatriation a violation of human rights on several counts.[46]

Türkiye deported 142,536 people in 2024, according to annual reports of the Presidency of Migration Management, a significant increase from 130,611 people in 2023, 120,484 people in 2022, and 46,845 in 2021.[47]

Marked by a Black Seal: Restriction Codes

In recent years, Turkish authorities have assigned restriction codes to some Uyghurs, especially those with less secure immigration status. Restriction codes are a combination of letters and numbers in police and immigration systems in Türkiye. Authorities can assign such codes to any foreigner in Türkiye deemed to violate immigration-related rules or Turkish laws or, more generally, undesirable for unspecified reasons.[48] Migrants and refugees like Uyghurs are often assigned code G87, denoting them as a threat to general public security.

The Legal Framework

Article 9 of Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection provides that the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) "may impose an entry ban against foreigners whose entry to Türkiye is objectionable for public order, public security or public health reasons." A legal amendment dated December 6, 2019, made it possible to impose entry bans on foreigners already residing in Türkiye (meaning anyone with such a ban would be denied re-entry on exiting the country).[49]

Notably, Article 54 (2) of the same law allows Turkish authorities to issue removal decisions against people who are seeking, or who have obtained, international protection status if they are deemed a threat to public order, public security, or public health, in violation of their internationally protected rights.[50]

Although neither article mentions the term "restriction codes", authorities routinely cite them as the original legal source when issuing these codes. In addition, the PMM has issued a regulation and circular on how it exercises the power to issue entry bans and assign foreigners a "restriction code."[51] According to this circular, which Human Rights Watch was able to obtain a copy, the G category applies to foreigners whose entry into Türkiye is considered objectionable in terms of public order, public security, or public health.

The annex to the circular provides an extensive list of reasons that may trigger a G code designation, with significant discretion granted to authorities. For example, if a restriction code is applied based on a complaint that also constitutes a criminal offense under Turkish law, the code is not removed, even if the person is acquitted or the investigation is dropped without charges. Indeed, in a case reviewed by Human Rights Watch where an individual sought to annul a deportation order, the court ruled that the deportation

its ruling.

Being designated with a restriction code can result in a range of negative consequences, from cancelation of residency and/or international protection status, to being subjected to administrative immigration detention and deportation, as well as being banned from re-entering Türkiye. Yet the evidence indicates that the broad criteria and discretion granted has led to G codes being applied to people who pose no threat of public order, public security, or public health at all. For a foreign national residing in Türkiye, becoming the subject of a complaint can mean instantly rendering their status irregular, and if they are stopped during a routine check, they may be sent to a deportation center and deported.

Despite the far-reaching implications that a restriction code designation entails for various rights, the PMM circular is not published online or otherwise publicly accessible. Even some lawyers who work in the field of immigration law, whom Human Rights Watch spoke with, said they do not have or were unable to access a copy of the circular.[52]

The Role of Foreign Intelligence in Issuing Restriction Codes

As noted above, migrants and refugees are often assigned code G87.[53] In these cases, the PMM imposes restriction codes following recommendations from other agencies, typically the General Directorate of Security and the National Intelligence Agency, which take into account information including intelligence from other governments.

The fact that Turkish authorities may base these restriction codes on intelligence provided by other governments has provided an opening for authoritarian governments like China that weaponize counter-terrorism campaigns for the purpose of repression. According to a lawyer in Türkiye who represents refugees, including Uyghurs:

> The countries that have sizable populations and dissidents in Türkiye are using and exploiting these practices. They send “terrorist” lists to Turkish authorities and “code” the people who criticize them. Countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and China are doing this. [54]

There is some evidence that the Chinese government has sent names of Uyghurs whom they accuse of being terrorists to the Turkish authorities, seeking their return.[55] Idris

did he find out that the Chinese government had also put him on an Interpol red notice "for belonging to a terrorist organization." In Türkiye, Interpol notices typically result in a G87 restriction code without the person having been investigated by the relevant authorities.[57] Interpol later cancelled that notice following international outcry, as Hasan, having fled Türkiye, was arrested in Morocco in 2021 and faced deportation to China.[58] Hasan was allowed to travel to the United States in March 2025 and reunited with his family in Canada in September 2025.[59]

One other Uyghur told Human Rights Watch that he was also accused of being a "terrorist" by the Chinese government. Because he is a Turkish citizen, he was interrogated then released.[60]

In 2016 in the aftermath of an attempted coup d'état, the Turkish government declared a state of emergency and authorities made broad use of their public security and anti-terrorism powers, often in an abusive and unlawful manner.[61] While the state of emergency ended in 2018, abuse of those powers continues. The routine opaque and arbitrary designation of code G87 to migrant residents in Türkiye is an example of such abuse. According to a report by Türkiye-based NGO, MAZLUMDER (The Association for Human Rights and Solidarity for the Oppressed), officials now treat "individuals with security-related restriction codes such as G87 or G89 as 'terrorists.'"[62]

Lawyers report that Turkish courts, when asked to annul code designations, have increasingly issued rulings based on police records and the discretionary authority of the migration administration, without examining elements essential to effective judicial review, such as concrete evidence, objective conditions, or reasonable justification.

A Turkish government official knowledgeable about the situation of Uyghurs in the country told Human Rights Watch that the combination of anti-immigration policies and growing Chinese government pressure means that Uyghurs are assigned restriction codes like other migrants despite the known risks facing Uyghurs. The official said "[i]t has become very difficult to remove those codes through courts."[63] He emphasized that this practice creates debilitating uncertainty for a broad swath of Uyghurs in the country and "pushes people's lives toward a complete unknown."

Code G87 in Practice

concrete evidence about potential misconduct, and it is often hard to know why a Uyghur gets the code, according to interviews with Uyghurs, lawyers who represent them, and a review of five court decisions involving Uyghurs.

In the five court cases Human Rights Watch reviewed concerning deportation orders against individuals assigned Code G87, the courts deemed the deportation decisions lawful despite being based on general, abstract statements. The decisions fail to explain the basis on which the court accepted the claim that an individual's behavior was dangerous to public security but defer to what they claim is the state authorities' broad discretionary power stemming from the state's sovereign rights.

Furthermore, the court decisions failed to make any assessment of the internationally recognized situation of Uyghurs in China. The judges disregarded Uyghurs' claims regarding the risks they would face in China should they be deported, citing "insufficient explanations and supporting documents." In all five cases, the court ruled that the individual was not protected by the prohibition of refoulement.

None of the court decisions or the PMM decisions that rejected residence permit applications which Human Rights Watch reviewed contained concrete justifications for the actions against individual Uyghurs. Uyghurs interviewed told Human Rights Watch that, in some cases, they inferred possible reasons that led to them being given a G87 code. For example, some were accused of immigration infractions. One Uyghur who came to Türkiye in 2016 with his family with a valid travel document told Human Rights Watch that he might have gotten a G87 code due to police failure to recognize the validity of his immigration documents:

> In early 2019, I was stopped at a police checkpoint and sent to a deportation center. At that time, I had my proof of residency application [Müraacat] with me, yet the police did not recognize it as a valid residence permit. I spent a year at a deportation center. Later, I found out that I had a G87 code. I don't know if I already had the code before the detention or if they put that on me because of my detention. To this date, it is still not clear.[64]

Another Uyghur told Human Rights Watch he may have gotten a G87 code following immigration infractions and after Turkish authorities received an anonymous complaint about him. Turkish authorities cancelled his conditional refugee protection status, which led to a deportation order:

> Turkish border illegally which resulted in several months of detention at various deportation centers. [However], I was not prosecuted nor found guilty, and I was released unconditionally....
>
> Afterwards, I applied for refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).... I received the conditional refugee card and not long after that, I was summoned to the immigration office and later detained over an anonymous complaint accusing me of operating an underground gun store.[65]
>
> I seriously thought it was a joke as I was living under protection with my family.... I was detained for more than a month and brought to the court which found me innocent and ruled that I should be unconditionally released.
>
> Before my release, immigration authorities canceled my UNHCR protection and issued me a humanitarian residence permit valid for two years. However, the migration office denied my request for renewal recently and told me that I have a deportation decision and a G87 restriction code.[66]

While the constitutional court rejected the man's appeal against this deportation decision, he was successful before an administrative court in appealing the decision to reject his application for a residence permit. As a result, the PMM issued him a humanitarian residence permit. However, the lawyer expressed concerns that he may face further problems in the future when he needs to renew his permit because of the existing deportation decision and code G87.

Another lawyer who represents Uyghurs told Human Rights Watch that arbitrariness is a very common experience among Uyghurs who were assigned restriction codes leading to the cancelation of their residence permits, saying, "Many of my clients don't know the reasons or the negative information Turkish authorities received [about them] that led to the restriction codes."[67]

Another lawyer raised similar concerns about the vague definition of "public security or public order threats":

> authorities do not provide concrete evidence on the basis for which they came to this conclusion. Such practices undermine the presumption of innocence.[68]

Another lawyer echoed a similar concern:

> The meaning of "public order or public security" is open to interpretation in Turkish law.... When the foreigner is involved in any judicial procedures, regardless of the decision or severity of the alleged action, there is a department called GÖKSEM which decides whether that action necessitates deportation.[69]

That same lawyer then gave a striking example illustrating how easily a migrant can get assigned a G87 code; even being named in a judicial investigation that concerns other people is reason enough for a restriction code:

> In some instances, people who had a call with someone suspicious can get assigned a code. For example, there was a Uyghur who was detained on suspicion of "terrorism" but then released unconditionally, as there was a lack of evidence. However, during the investigation, everyone who had a phone call with this person got a G87 code, because the investigation was related to terrorism. This person got released but among those who got a code G87, there are people [who are experiencing] serious issues with their immigration status.[70]

Another lawyer also said that placing "foreigners whose names have appeared in judicial procedures" in administrative immigration detention is a common practice in Türkiye.[71]

A Uyghur interviewee shared another equally striking case where a simple misunderstanding with a neighbor led to immigration detention and a deportation decision. According to the interviewee:

> Police came to my house and told me there was a complaint about me from the neighbors. After the initial interrogation, they took me to a deportation center for more than three months, for nothing. Even when that neighbor took their complaint back, it changed nothing. I

> and immigration office. Now, because I don't have any legal documents, I'm even afraid to go outside, for simple things such as groceries, because I don't want to end up in deportation center again. [72]

A lawyer who represents Uyghurs explained how it is almost impossible to appeal decisions about the restriction codes, even in court:

> When we appeal against the restriction codes, we often request from the relevant authorities their assessment, reasons, and evidence for such decisions. In another words, we [first] demand that the authorities provide an official document that shows that this code exists [for this person] which then would be used to appeal the decision in court. However, it is almost impossible to obtain such documents, which makes it harder for us to work on such cases.[73]

Another lawyer expressed similar concerns regarding the difficulty of appealing administrative decisions such as deportation decisions:

> The problem with the system starts when simple suspicion triggers the administration to issue a deportation decision, after which it's almost impossible for the migrants or refugees to appeal that decision. It can also lead to long-term administrative detention.[74]

While individuals have a right to appeal their arbitrarily assigned restriction codes in administrative courts, "judges often make a negative decision when they see such codes, just to be safe," a lawyer who has made multiple such appeals told Human Rights Watch. [75] Lawyers have been successful in some instances on such appeals, but often they are not. In a recent 2025 case, authorities deported Turkmen activists Alisher Sahatov and Abdylla Orusov despite a constitutional court decision reversing the removal decision.[76]

Uyghurs Face Growing Difficulties Obtaining Residence Permits

that Uyghurs without Turkish citizenship are facing increasing difficulties securing residence permits and are at increased risk of being detained in deportation centers. They said Turkish authorities have arbitrarily cancelled the residence permits of Uyghurs or rejected their residency or citizenship applications, often on the basis that the individual poses a "threat to public security" without providing supporting evidence for the allegations. "Uyghurs are not even given humanitarian [residence] permits nowadays," a lawyer told Human Rights Watch.[77]

As noted above, Human Rights Watch reviewed four PMM decisions denying Uyghurs residence permits, three of which are related to long-term residence permits while one is related to a humanitarian residence permit.

In two of the long-term residency denials, the PMM cited "failure to meet the conditions set by the Migration Policy Board" as a reason for rejecting long-term residence permit applications. While in the other decision, authorities also added "having a deportation order" against the individual among reasons for the rejection. Although the individual was informed of their right to appeal the decision, the decision itself did not specify what conditions had not been met or provide any information about the deportation order, which the individual did not know existed, including its date of issuance or the facts or events forming the basis for it. Consequently, the individual was left without clear grounds for appealing the decision.

The PMM decision to reject a humanitarian residence permit is equally opaque. It rejected the application without specific facts, justifications, or assessments, merely stating abstractly that "the person requesting a humanitarian residence permit did not meet the conditions specified in article 46 of Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection" notwithstanding the applicant on the face of it did fall within the categories to whom a humanitarian permit should be given.[78]

Human Rights Watch also reviewed three decisions that rejected Uyghurs' citizenship applications, issued by the General Directorate of Population and Citizenship Affairs. The reasons for rejection stated that there are "obstacles to public order" and "national security," citing the article 12 of Law No. 5901 on Turkish Citizenship.

A lawyer who represents Uyghurs told Human Rights Watch that Uyghurs face increasing precarity in the immigration system:

> permit [instead]. The decision is arbitrary. And some of my clients' humanitarian residence permits are also cancelled or denied renewal.
>
> In such situations, people can be held in those centers for up to one year. Then they will be released without legal status. Then, after a couple of days, another police checkpoint can lead them to detention once again. It is ... a horrible vicious cycle for those who don't have proper documents. Türkiye has increasingly become an unlivable place for Uyghurs.[79]

Having been held in a deportation center alone is reason enough for authorities to cancel one's residence permit, a lawyer told Human Rights Watch:

> Authorities can also reject the humanitarian residence permit application ... because [the applicant] has a record of being held in administrative detention, for a valid or invalid reason. In that situation, their and their families' lives will be affected severely.[80]

A representative of a Uyghur NGO based in Türkiye, who himself had difficulty applying for a residence permit, told Human Rights Watch:

> As far as we have documented, Turkish authorities have sent more than 100 Uyghurs to deportation centers in 2024 alone. Those people generally don't have long-term residence permits and are on humanitarian residence permits. When they go to renew their humanitarian residency, many started to have problems and, without a valid permit, they end up in detention. Nobody has clear statistics about those incidents.[81]

A Uyghur said he could not apply for a residence permit in Türkiye because he was held in a deportation center, even though the court acquitted him for the crime that led him to being detained. He left Türkiye and is now seeking refuge in a European country. He told Human Rights Watch:

> Turkish police detained me in 2024, alleging that I have connections with ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) but did not provide any

> my residence permit and rejected my re-application. I did not have any criminal record, and I requested that they open an investigation if they continued to have suspicions, [and that] otherwise ... they should renew my residence permit. My lawyer told me [he knew] I was innocent, but he could not help me with the immigration system. I had a valid Chinese passport, so I decided to risk everything and made my way to safety—as I [soon] could be in [administrative] immigration detention again or be deported to a third country, as the immigration officers communicated to me. I know many Uyghurs who are in a similar situation, and they live in fear in Türkiye.[82]

A Uyghur whose residence permit application was rejected by the authorities shared a similar story of arbitrary detention and repeated failure to renew his residence permit:

> I was treated as if I was guilty. I spent one year in detention.... I tried several times to renew my residence permit but failed. The immigration office told me I had 10 days to leave the country, after telling me that my latest residence permit application was rejected. Then, I decided to leave the country. I had my Chinese passport, so I booked a flight to a third country that would be a path for me to go to safety in Europe. Turkish authorities detained me at the airport and put me on a two-year entry ban.
>
> My wife and children are still in Türkiye. They have long-term residence permits and have applied for Turkish citizenship. Their citizenship applications were rejected without a reason, and I don't know how I can reunite with them.[83]

Another Uyghur in Türkiye, who does not have a valid residence permit, told Human Rights Watch how he lives in fear:

> I applied for a humanitarian [residence] permit when I first arrived in Türkiye and later applied for a long-term residence permit when Turkish authorities started giving Uyghurs such exceptions. But my application was rejected and so I re-applied for the humanitarian residence permit. One year ago, immigration authorities asked me to check-in monthly and told me that I have a [restriction] code. But I

> been arbitrarily detained and interrogated at least twice, for two-hours each, because my residence permit has a problem—that I have a deportation decision. Now I live in fear, even when I go out during the day, I don't feel safe as police can stop me and take me to a deportation center. I know many people who have had such problems. [84]

Uyghurs who came to Türkiye without a valid passport are also now struggling to get even a humanitarian residence permit. One of them told Human Rights Watch that an immigration officer threatened him when he tried to understand why he could not get a permit and said: "if you continue to make noise, I will lock you up."[85]

A lawyer who has been working on such cases emphasized that Turkish authorities might be hesitant processing international protection for Uyghurs because of China:

> Humanitarian residence permits are a political issue. The government does not want to give Uyghurs international protection [as conditional refugees] because of China; therefore, it issues humanitarian residence permits. When those are rejected, there is no other route for the Uyghurs. And sometimes a rejection of a humanitarian residence permit can lead to a "code," not vice versa, where the officials think it might be rejected for a "reason," without backing it with evidence.[86]

All the Uyghurs Human Rights Watch interviewed said Turkish authorities did not provide evidence of the grounds that led to their restriction codes or a rejection of their residency or citizenship applications. The vague term "public security threat" has been used without explanation about what threats they posed and on what basis. All the lawyers interviewed said that it has become extremely difficult to appeal these restriction codes, or the cancellations or rejections of residence permits.

A lawyer who works on migrant and refugee rights and who represents some Uyghurs told Human Rights Watch that a combination of factors makes certain Uyghurs particularly vulnerable:

> Down in the line, there are problems that are related to security and migrant and refugee policies in Türkiye. The cases relate to various factors such as intelligence information coming from China, such as

> permits or citizenship applications of people on vague [claims that they] "endanger public safety," without proper investigation of those cases.[87]

Human Rights Watch wrote to Turkish authorities, and among other questions, asked for data on the number of Uyghurs whose residence permit applications have been repealed or renewals rejected since 2018 but had not received a reply at time of writing.

Protected No More: "I Was Treated as a Criminal"

Conditions at the Deportation Centers

According to Turkish law, a person can be held in immigration detention, a form of non-criminal or administrative detention, for up to six months and the period can be extended for up to an additional six months in certain circumstances.[88]

All the interviewees for this report, including lawyers who regularly visit the deportation centers where such detainees are held (Geri Gönderme Merkezi in Turkish), raised concerns about poor conditions and mistreatment of detainees in the centers. One lawyer said, "unfortunately, there is torture and mistreatment in the deportation centers where I have seen people whose skulls or limbs were broken."[89] Another lawyer said: "There is mistreatment. Even as lawyers, we wait in long queues to see our clients. The duration of our meetings are arbitrary. There are no standards at these facilities."[90]

In 2022, Human Rights Watch documented inhuman and degrading conditions and ill treatment in deportation centers in Türkiye.[91] Former detainees told Human Rights Watch they were frequently transferred from one deportation center to another, sometimes even returning to the same center after being transferred to another. This appeared to be because of overcrowding in the centers, but these frequent transfers exacerbated anxiety and made it exceedingly difficult for detainees to make and maintain

Human Rights Watch interviewed Uyghurs whom the Turkish authorities sent to deportation centers in various periods between 2017-2025. Some of these interviewees experienced multiple detentions during this period, including as recently as early 2025.

One Uyghur who spent several months at various deportation centers told Human Rights Watch:

> The conditions were very poor. In one instance, the facility did not provide proper food for nine days straight. In one deportation center, I slept on the cement floor for a week where I shared a single blanket with two other people. There were 20 people in a small cell, where there was no sense of hygiene. I witnessed people who got infested with lice.[92]

Another Uyghur described his initial interaction with Turkish police to Human Rights Watch:

> I was treated very badly at the police station during the initial interrogation. They repeatedly asked me why I was in Türkiye. I replied I have escaped China's repression and came to seek protection. I told them I consider you as my brothers. They shouted back and said: "We don't love you here. Fuck off. Piece of shit. Dirty bastard. Go back to where you came from."

The man then spent two months in custody at various deportation centers and described some of the inhuman and degrading treatment to which he was subjected.

> Later I was transferred to a deportation center where the officers strip-searched me in front of other policemen and policewomen and humiliated me. Officers forced me to remove all my clothes, including my underwear.[93]

Three other people interviewed by Human Rights Watch said officers strip-searched them at the deportation centers.

for reasons of immigration.[94] Without a clear legal basis that complies with international human rights norms, subjecting migrants in Turkish deportation centers to searches of any kind is unlawful and strip searches are a violation of the prohibition on inhuman and degrading treatment.

Risk of Deportation from Türkiye

Turkish authorities claim they have never deported any Uyghurs to China. Despite those denials in 2018 and 2019, at least six people, including two children, may have been deported from Türkiye to China. In May 2018, Turkish authorities reportedly deported at least three Uyghurs, Burhan Kerim, Muhammed Ali, and Tohti Adiljan, directly to China.[95] In June 2019, Turkish authorities deported Zinnetgul Tursun and her two toddler daughters, Hilal Shehinur and Banu Abdullah, to Tajikistan, after which Tajik authorities returned them to China.[96] Her sister in Türkiye said Zinnetgul has not been heard from since.[97]

Moreover, a Human Rights Watch review of Turkish and Uyghur sources turned up news articles and social media posts that describe the detention of a total of 33 Uyghurs at deportation centers in Türkiye between December 2018 and October 2025. Human Rights Watch was unable to trace if any were ultimately returned. Estimates of local NGOs and lawyers suggest the actual number of those detained for the purpose of deportation is likely much higher.

All the people interviewed, including lawyers, told Human Rights Watch that Turkish immigration authorities pressure detainees to sign “voluntary return” forms. At least three of the Uyghurs Human Rights Watch spoke with signed the form, and one of them was deported to the United Arab Emirates, which has an extradition treaty with China. The second Uyghur shared his experience of nearly being deported to China in 2019; it did not happen because he made a lot of noise at the airport, but it still throws into question the Turkish authorities’ claim that nobody has been deported to China:

> It was 4:00 a.m. and the officials took me to the car. They did not tell me where they were taking me. I asked them and they replied: “We are sending you to China.” They took me to the airport, and I clearly remember it was an international departure. I panicked and begged them not to deport me. I told them, “Kill me here, right now, rather than sending me to China.” My hands were cuffed but they removed

> some other people and transferred me to domestic departures; I was then sent to another deportation center in Türkiye.[98]

Immigration officers often pressure foreigners, regardless of their protection status, to sign "voluntary return" forms, according to interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch. A lawyer who worked on unlawful deportations of migrants and refugees said: "99 percent of those deported, regardless of whether they are Uyghurs, sign under pressure; all of those [deportations] are unlawful."[99]

A Uyghur who spent one month at a deportation center told Human Rights Watch:

> I was treated poorly, as if I was a criminal. At the time of the detention, officers interrogated me and asked me to sign a document in Turkish and Chinese. I could not fully understand either language. There was a translator at the deportation center, but that document was not interpreted for me. The officers told me to sign those papers, that it was for my own good. I did not have a lawyer. And eventually, I signed the paper. I did not know it was a "voluntary return" form. Luckily, my case went public and so I was released. But since then, I have a deportation decision and a G87 restriction code that has made it impossible for me to have legal residency in Türkiye.[100]

Another lawyer confirmed to Human Rights Watch that authorities force detainees at deportation centers to sign voluntary deportation forms, which is against the law:

> Once people end up in deportation centers, they are generally asked, sometimes forced, to sign voluntary deportation forms. I have seen a Uyghur client who was asked to sign such paper. I did not allow that to happen. If I did not intervene, that person might have ended up on a plane to China. Everyone is asked to sign that form. People who are illiterate or who don't understand the language that they are reading are still asked to sign. The officers who are working at those facilities do not know that it is illegal to do so. There are special cases where nonrefoulement applies, especially in cases of Uyghurs.[101]

Türkiye typically deports Uyghurs to countries where they can enter without a visa with their Chinese passports, such as countries in the Balkans, the Gulf, Central Asia, and in

risk of deportation to China.

Human Rights Watch reviewed 12 deportation decisions and five court documents related to appeals, the majority of which are from 2023-2025. Administrative courts have several times disregarded claims by Uyghurs that they would be persecuted if returned to China. The court decisions claim there was no serious, concrete evidence that the individual before the court would be subjected to persecution if removed to China.[102] In one such court decision, the court ruled that the deportation of a Uyghur from Türkiye to Kyrgyzstan or Ecuador was not unlawful under article 54 (1) (d) of Law No. 6454 on Foreigners and International Protection, because the person "posed a threat to public order or public security or public health." Kyrgyzstan has an extradition treaty with China. Ecuador has signed an extradition treaty with China which awaits ratification. The courts did not take the danger of refoulement in those countries into consideration. Human Rights Watch was able to verify that one of the individuals made it safely to a European country, another one is currently living in Istanbul with a humanitarian residence permit, while unable to trace the current situation of the remaining Uyghurs.

One lawyer who worked on Uyghur cases also echoed similar concerns and told Human Rights Watch that administrative court appeal decisions are putting Uyghurs in harm's way:

> According to Law No. 6458 [which regulates nonrefoulement] there should not be a deportation decision about Uyghurs. However, in practice, when we had deportation decisions from the immigration authorities in the past, the courts would accept Uyghurs' appeal and say, "it is problematic to deport this individual to the country of origin, but they can be deported voluntarily or to a third country." But the latest court decisions say, "it is not problematic to deport to the country of origin—China." Maybe there is no direct deportation to China as the authorities claim, but the fear of Uyghurs who have foreigner status in Türkiye is rising significantly.[103]

Turkish administrative courts are also inconsistent, as highlighted in scholarly articles about refugee rights in the country. As one scholar concluded after identifying multiple inconsistencies in judgments of administrative courts from 2014 to 2021, "the decision-making of the administrative courts is still too much of a lottery."[104]

which they can enter visa-free after removal from Türkiye. He also noted that courts used to take into account the situation in China but now are doing so less often or perhaps not at all:

> When a Uyghur ends up in a deportation center, past approaches [that led authorities to treat the cases differently from other cases] have come to an end. Immigration authorities take the deportation decision against everyone. It is unlawful, but they insist. In the past, administrative courts would overrule deportation orders [when it concerns Uyghurs]. For the first time, courts have affirmed the immigration body's decision in several such cases. And we should remember, the concept of a safe third country does not exist for Uyghurs who are facing deportation with their Chinese passports.[105]

Seeking Safety

The combination of Chinese aggressive transnational repression of Uyghurs and the pressure it puts on authorities in Türkiye, warming China-Türkiye ties, and increasing anti-immigrant policies in Türkiye combine to make Uyghurs feel that they are no longer protected and safe in Türkiye. There are no publicly available statistics on the number of Uyghurs leaving Türkiye, but there are some trying to make their way to safety in Europe, including four Uyghurs interviewed for this report, as noted above.

Another option for Uyghurs is Canada, after the Canadian House of Commons adopted a motion, M62, in February 2023 that aimed to "expedite the entry of 10,000 Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in need of protection" to the country through its Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program.[106] Human Rights Watch interviewed 13 Uyghurs for the report and among the seven of them who are currently in Türkiye, six have applied for the M62 program.

One Uyghur activist told Human Rights Watch that increasing numbers of Uyghurs in Türkiye are trying to seek safety elsewhere, especially those with the less secure immigration status:

> The transnational repression against Uyghurs in Türkiye is pushing Uyghurs out of Türkiye, sometimes even for Uyghurs with Turkish citizenship. But those who are mostly affected are the ones without a

> information nor follow due process in such cases. And that pushed them to find safety elsewhere.[107]

Human Rights Watch interviewed one Uyghur refugee who "voluntarily" deported himself, and he described his long struggle to make his way to a safe place. He told us that after he left Türkiye, the Chinese government sought his return from the governments of the third countries where he was seeking refuge. Chinese authorities also pressured him to provide information about fellow Uyghurs, and what he saw as threatening references to his family members back in Xinjiang:

> I decided to leave—self-deport myself—as I was severely disappointed in Türkiye. They put code G87 on me when I was leaving, barring me from re-entering Türkiye for five years. Turkish authorities deported me to a country that did not require visas for those holding Chinese passports. I did not have any money and did not know anyone there, so I decided to go to another country that also has a visa-free agreement with China.
>
> I lived there for a couple of years illegally, hiding, working various jobs. However, I could not even open a bank account or go to the hospital. I ended up in prison where I was treated poorly and had health problems. As I was a Chinese national, the local police reported me to the Chinese Embassy. They came to look for me several times in less than a half year. Luckily the authorities refused to deport me, despite the pressure to do so from the Chinese government, as it would have been in violation of international law.
>
> After that, I went to another country where I tried to start a new life. I got married. I had a residence permit. And I also became politically active. That got the attention of the Chinese government which started to harass me in this new location as well. I applied for UNHCR protection. But someone working there told me off the record: "Your situation is dangerous; the Chinese government is looking for you."
>
> Finally, I decided to leave that country as well because of its close relationship with China and because of the intimidations I faced. I took the risk and crossed many borders illegally to reach a safe

> refused to work for them even when they threatened to [detain] members of my family. Despite everything, I live with my values.[108]

Relevant International Law

Türkiye is a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), as well as the 1951 Refugee Convention, all of which have particular relevance to the violations against Uyghurs identified in this report.[109]

Non-Refoulement

International law obligates governments to respect the principle of nonrefoulement, that is the prohibition on the transfer of anyone to a place where they would face a real risk of persecution, torture or other ill-treatment, or a threat to life. This applies whether the person is transferred directly to the place of likely persecution or abuse or indirectly through chain-refoulement. The principle of nonrefoulement is part of customary international law, included in the human rights treaties listed above to which Türkiye is a party, and incorporated into Turkish law.

The ECHR and the ICCPR—in articles 3 and 7 respectively—both set out an absolute prohibition on torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, which includes an absolute prohibition on sending anyone to a country where there is a risk that the individual would be subjected to such treatment. Article 3 of CAT explicitly sets out the prohibition on sending a person to a place where “there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.”

in article 33 of the treaty.[110]

Article 4 of Türkiye's Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection reflects its nonrefoulement obligations, providing that "no one shall be returned to a place where he or she may be subjected to torture, inhumane or degrading punishment or treatment or, where his/her life or freedom would be threatened on account of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."[111] Article 55 of the same law lists categories of people who should not be issued with removal decisions, which includes those for whom "there are serious indications to believe that they shall be subjected to the death penalty, torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in the country to which they shall be returned...". It does not, however, explicitly reference those with well-founded fears of being persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of particular social group, or political opinion.[112]

Prohibition on Degrading Treatment

The absolute prohibition on torture and other inhuman and degrading treatment in the ECHR, ICCPR, and CAT covers all treatment by authorities of individuals deprived of their liberty, or, more generally, who are confronted with law-enforcement officers, and includes conditions of detention. Human Rights Watch was told of various abusive treatment by law enforcement against Uyghurs, from verbal insults to strip searches and physical assaults, as well as poor conditions of detention.

Degrading Treatment

Ill-treatment must attain a minimum level of severity before it violates the absolute prohibition, but the level depends on all the circumstances of the case, such as the duration of the treatment, its physical or mental effects and sometimes the sex, age, and state of health of the victim.[113] However, the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly reiterated that any recourse to physical force against a detainee by law enforcement which has not been made strictly necessary by the conduct of the detainee, diminishes human dignity, and that any conduct by law enforcement officers against an individual which diminishes human dignity constitutes a violation of the ECHR.[114]

With respect to strip searches, while they may be justified on occasion to ensure prison security or to prevent disorder or crime, the Court has found that searches which have no

detained in relation to immigration on either basis. The Court has also underscored that if such searches are lawfully carried out, it should always be in an appropriate manner with due respect for human dignity as well as for a legitimate purpose. If the manner in which a search is carried out has debasing elements, which significantly aggravate the inevitable humiliation entailed in the procedure, for example, obliging a male prisoner to strip in the presence of a female officer, or conducting a search before guards who are deriding and verbally abusing the prisoner, it will give rise to a violation.[115]

The UN Committee Against Torture has set out similar standards on when strip searches may be permitted and safeguards are necessary to prevent prohibited treatment.[116]

Conditions of Detention

Assessing the suitability of conditions of detention for migrants on immigration grounds is directly linked to the fact that they are being held for immigration reasons and not because they are serving a sentence or facing criminal proceedings. The state has to ensure that "detention conditions are compatible with respect for human dignity, and that detainees are not exposed to distress or hardship of an intensity exceeding the unavoidable level of suffering inherent in detention and that their health and well-being are appropriately secured."[117] The European Court has on a number of occasions found Türkiye to have violated article 3 of the ECHR due to the conditions of detention in which migrants were held.[118]

Prohibition on Arbitrary Detention

The ECHR and the ICCPR, in articles 5 and 9 respectively, prohibit subjecting anyone to arbitrary arrest or detention. The Human Rights Committee, in General Comment No. 35 on arbitrary detention, has made clear that detention is arbitrary not only when it lacks a legal basis, but also when it is disproportionate, inappropriate, or unjust; lacks elements of reasonableness and necessity; or when due process is not followed such as when there is a failure to respect judicial review, access to counsel, or to provide reasons for arrest.[119]

Article 5 (1) of the ECHR requires that detention must be in accordance with law, meaning that it must both have a clear legal basis in national law and must follow the procedure prescribed by law. The European Court of Human Rights has also repeatedly emphasized that all detention decisions should be based on individualized judicial reasoning.[120]

whether removal is a realistic prospect and whether detention with a view to removal is from the outset, or continues to be, justified.[121]

The non-criminal detentions of Uyghurs in Türkiye, often for prolonged periods, appear to be arbitrary and fail to respect the rule of law. To the extent that they are linked to decisions of removal, despite the clear risk of refoulement which should render removal not an option, underscores the arbitrary and unlawful nature of these detentions.

Right to an Effective Remedy

Anyone faced with a deportation decision is entitled to an effective remedy to challenge the lawfulness of that decision including whether implementation of that decision could lead to refoulement. Specifically, article 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights obligates Türkiye to provide everyone including migrants seeking international protection with an "independent and rigorous scrutiny of a claim that there exist substantial grounds for fearing a real risk of treatment contrary to [the Convention] and the possibility of suspending the implementation of the measure impugned."[122] The evidence indicates that Türkiye's administrative courts are not providing this safeguard to Uyghurs faced with threat of deportation from Türkiye.

Recommendations

To the Turkish Government

To the Presidency of Migration Management:

- Ensure that there are no deportations or other removals of Uyghurs in Türkiye to China or to third countries where they may be at risk of onward return to China.

- Implement the Interior Ministry's decision to make long-term residency accessible for Uyghurs by ensuring thorough and respectful assessment of residence permit applications.

- Provide concrete evidence for the grounds on which applications for residence permits are rejected or deportation decisions issued, including whether such decisions were made based on restriction codes; notify people in a timely manner; and ensure remedies to challenge these decisions are both accessible and effective.

- Regularly publish statistics on the application of restriction codes; approvals and rejections for conditional refugee status and subsidiary protection; temporary protection; and deportations and so-called voluntary returns that include nationality and demographics of individuals and the countries to which people are being sent.

- Subject extradition requests from authoritarian governments like China to the highest scrutiny to ensure that acceding to any request would not risk violations of the rights of the person being sought or violating Türkiye's international human rights obligations.

- Subject intelligence and allegations of extremism and terrorism against Uyghurs from the Chinese government to the highest scrutiny to avoid being complicit in the latter's efforts to conflate Uyghurs' peaceful speech and behavior with crime.

- Ensure that the rights of all detained migrants are respected in full, and in particular that they are treated with dignity, which includes adequate hygiene and medical care at deportation centers.

- Do not pressure foreigners to sign voluntary return forms at deportation centers.

- Conduct effective investigations into allegations of ill-treatment including coerced signing of voluntary return forms and strip searches, especially in deportation centers, ensuring the involvement of the individuals concerned and their lawyers; inform the public of the investigation's findings; and subject any officer engaged in illegal acts to appropriate sanctions including criminal penalties.

- Ensure access for UNHCR and other independent observers, including Bar Association representatives and independent civil societies, to deportation centers and other locations where migrants are detained.

- Develop and publish regulations on “voluntary return” procedures that guarantee free and informed consent consistent with international standards.

- Repeal the power to assign entry bans to foreigners already resident in Türkiye and introduce legal safeguards to ensure designation of a restriction code does not directly or automatically lead to the cancellation of residence or international protection permits, the rejection of applications for such permits, or a deportation decision, and that any decision on the security status of a foreigner can only be made on the basis of concrete evidence following a fair and transparent procedure that respects due process.

To the Chinese Government

- End crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang.

- Investigate and appropriately prosecute government officials implicated in crimes against humanity against Uyghurs.

- Immediately halt all forms of transnational repression against Uyghurs abroad, including using the Interpol red notice system to stifle dissent.

- Do not coerce other governments to force Uyghurs to return to China against their will.

To Governments that Resettle Uyghurs

- Increase refugee resettlement places for Uyghurs and other refugees in Türkiye and establish and maintain generous complementary pathways for safe, legal, and orderly migration of Uyghurs and other third country nationals from Türkiye for family reunification, education, and employment.

- Do not consider Türkiye as a safe country for Uyghurs who hold residency there, including long term permits.

To the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

UNHCR faces to acccess people in immigration detention in Türkiye.

- Encourage third states to increase resettlement numbers and complementary pathways for protection for conditional refugees in Türkiye.
- Urge the Presidency of Migration Management to implement international protection according to international standards and, in particular, to prevent direct or indirect refoulement of individuals to a country where they may face human rights violations.

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